DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 132 566 CS 203 086

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TITLE Books for Canadian Kids: Children's Literature and Creative Writing.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 5p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; Composition (Literary); *Creative Writing; Elementary Education; Literature; *Literature Appreciation; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

A major task of teachers is to help all children to enjoy creative writing and to become effective in written communication. Literature may be read to inspire children to write, to help them explore their own imaginations, and to show them techniques used by other authors in characterization and dramatization. Children may share stories they write, putting them into booklets and adding them to the classroom library. (JM)

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Eileen Tway

BOOKS FOR CANADIAN KIDS:

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND CREATIVE WRITING

Children's Literature and Creative Writing are two of my favorite areas of the language arts. Today I hope to share some ideas about the interrelatedness of the two. Together, they form a large part of the content of the written language arts. I find it difficult to separate the two areas for several reasons:

(1) Children's Literature is someone's creative writing.
(2) When children write, in a way they are experiencing firsthand what happens in literature.
(3) Children's literature provides inspiration for writing, new ideas to try, models for writing.

I use the term 'children's literature and creative writing' quite broadly. I suppose I should drop adjectives and refer simply to literature and composition. While we are defining terms, I would like to share a definition of literature given to me by a third grader: "Literature is when you throw stuff all around--like 'Don't be a literature bug'".

Well, perhaps it's a good definition for me. I have become a literature bug and seem to be scattering stuff all around about literature and writing.

I know this session is entitled Books for Canadian Kids, so that as we proceed, I would like us to keep in mind the heritage of books from the English-speaking world that Canadian children have. There are the Canadian fairy tales and folk tales, many of Indian origin. There are the books from Great Britain and the United States. There are over 4000 juvenile titles by Canadian authors now in the National Library. And French-Canadian Children's Literature is growing. In sum, Canadian Kids and their teachers have access to a wealth of materials.

Whatever books are used, some of the purposes or values of literature for children must be kept in mind:

1. Enjoyment comes first.
2. It's what reading is all about. One can't read reading.
3. It provides for identification, perhaps even therapeutic help.
4. Literature gives an extension of experience.
5. Literature is related to writing.

Many children are motivated to want to read through the process of writing. Just how interrelated are the two: literature and writing? Is literature a good springboard to writing? John Stewig thinks so. He has written a whole book on the subject:

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Read To Write (New York: Hawthorn, 1975). But is there hard data? Research support? Not too much. Still, successful authors say that if you want to write, read, read, read!

Children's Literature and Creative Writing

Before we get into what some other people have found, let's try a little firsthand experience.

One of my favorite books of all time is Pierre Berton's The Secret World of Og. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961, 1974).

For starters, let's just take a general idea that Berton has used--along with many other writers--the device of letting his characters go through an opening into a fantasy world. Lewis Carroll had Alice fall through a rabbit hole. C. S. Lewis had his children go through the back of a wardrobe into Narnia. Berton has his five children go down into the secret world of Og through a hole in the playhouse floor.

For firsthand experience with this device, we are going to say that you are daydreaming a little at an English Teachers' Convention and that before your very eyes, a little opening is sawed in the floor at your feet. Suddenly you slip through the opening into another world. Where do you go? What problems do you face? How do you get back--if you do?

Try it.

What decisions did you have to make?
How did you feel?
Did you have an urge to share your story?
Do you see ways that the experience could help children better understand what happens in literature?

Specifically, Berton's book has possibilities beyond ideas for stories. It points up the importance of good literary quality in books. Penny wonders if the Og people might profit from reading Treasure Island or Little Women (see p. 128) instead of so many comic books. The single word language of Og and its limitations helps children see (and understand) the flexibility and wonder of our own language. The literary devices employed by Berton can be understood by children. (Characterization, point of view, etc.). The need for distinction between what is real and what is make-believe is brought out. Peter says, "I don't want to play any more".

As children experience literature, it stands to reason that literature provides models for their own writing.

Children's Literature and Creative Writing

The University of Georgia English Curriculum Study Center found that a systematic approach using models of literature for selected purposes worked better than incidental classroom contact with literature. (For more immediate results no doubt . However, for long-range writing effectiveness, continuous exposure to literature must surely help. Successful authors' most frequent advice to aspiring writers seems to be: If you want to write, read).

Pinkham (1968) used a model of literature approach with fifth graders and developed a series of lessons which had some influence in improving the children's written expression. Each lesson consisted of the following steps:

(1) Listening to the selection
(2) Discussing writing technique as reflected by the selection
(3) Reading and discussing pertinent portions of the selection which illustrate specific aims of the lesson
(4) Participating in creative writing exercises, using the techniques discussed
(5) Evaluating and rewriting.

The Secret World of Og provides passages that can help children see how the author reveals character, especially passages about Patsy or Earless Osdick. After steps 1,2,and 3, children could try their hand and pen at characterizing the Terrible Twins, neighbors referred to in the story and only peripheral to this story. Yet what made them so terrible? For step 5, children could test their characterizations on each other and revise accordingly. It could be a class sharing and learning time.

Helping children see the relationship between literature and their own writing seems to help, but of course if we get too systematic with the whole thing, it is no longer spontaneous, creative, interesting. Using literature as a springboard to writing should stay more at the experimental, exploratory level for young children. Literature provides the idea; the children try it out in their own way.

One good thing to do is to share several stories of a kind - and then let children try writing more of a kind - fairy tales, tall tales, myths. Myths are great fun for kids. Do you know the Canadian tale of "The Children with One Eye"? (Canadian Fairy Tales, Cyrus Macmillan, ed., the Week-end Library, 1928, p. 163). That would be a good introduction to a unit on myths.

As children write, their best stories can be put into little booklets to become part of the classroom library. Then their writing really does become part of their literature to share with each other. More books for Canadian Kids!

Children's Literature and Creative Writing

Our task as educators is not to turn all children into professional writers, of course; rather, it is to help all children experience writing as part of life--to become more effective in this area of communication and to develop the art to their fullest potential. If this happens, all children will benefit, both those who will write as a part of life and those who will write for a living. And all children will have a better understanding of others who write, especially the authors of their books. Experiencing what it is like to be an author should help children appreciate their literary heritage, and enjoy their reading all the more.

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